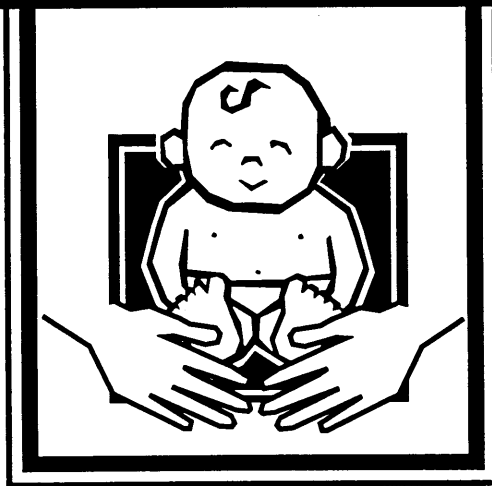


# **Co-Parenting Very Young Children After Divorce:**

**Predicting Patterns of Communication and Conflict**



BY  
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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF A PH.D. DISSERTATION**

**CO-PARENTING VERY YOUNG CHILDREN AFTER DIVORCE:**

**PREDICTING PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT**

**Vance Hitchner, Ph.D.**

This report summarizes findings of a student research project that was funded by the California Judicial Council's Family Law Dissertation Grant Program. Using data gathered as part of a federally funded study of visitation and custody arrangements of very young children, the author developed a method of analyzing semi-structured interviews that was used to predict subsequent patterns of communication in the co-parenting relationship.

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent years joint custody arrangements have gained favor, in part because they are thought to facilitate children's adjustment to divorce by increasing contact with the nonresidential parent. However, studies that have attempted to document the benefits of such increased contact have produced mixed results. For example, Johnston, Kline, and Tschann (1989) found that among 110 high-conflict families with enforced joint custody, children with more frequent access to both parents evidenced *more* behavioral disturbance and emotional disorder. One hypothesis which has been advanced to explain this inconsistency is that the quality of the continuing relationship between the separated parents plays an important part in determining the impact of frequent contact between children and their nonresidential parent.

In studies testing this hypothesis, the amount of continuing conflict between parents is the most common variable used to represent the quality of the co-parental relationship. In this context, conflict refers to disputes that are marked by hostile verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors (not to be confused with the inevitable conflicts of interest which characterize human relationships). A good synonym would be "fights." The level of conflict between parents is considered important because it consistently has been linked with children's adjustment.

A related aspect of the quality of the co-parenting relationship that also has received attention is the amount of cooperative communication between parents. This aspect includes communication about such topics as the logistics of visitation, the division of responsibilities, the short- and long-term decisions that affect the child, and the extent to which parents support or undermine each other. Communication in these areas is especially important when custody arrangements divide the child's residence between two households.

Recently published research by Maccoby, Depner, and Mnookin (1990) demonstrated that variations in the levels of conflict and cooperative communication can be used to identify patterns of co-parenting in different custody arrangements. Their analysis of interviews with nearly a thousand families (conducted roughly six and eighteen months after divorce) revealed three main patterns of co-parenting.

The first pattern, which Maccoby et al. called "disengaged," involved parents who displayed low levels for both conflict and communication. In these families, parents avoided contact with each other whenever possible, even if they were maintaining dual households for their children. Disengaged parents would rarely coordinate schedules or rules, and would arrange to exchange children in such a way as to minimize contact (at daycare, for example).

The second co-parenting pattern, termed "cooperative," consisted of families with low levels of conflict and high levels of cooperative communication. In these families, schedules and rules were coordinated and former partners tended to support each other's parenting.

The third category, labeled "conflicted," involved parents who reported high levels of discord and low levels of cooperative communication. Conflicted parents could not agree on mutual parenting, yet they did not disengage from each other, and consequently their conflicts were continually active. In these families there were frequent arguments between the parents, transitions between households were likely to be difficult for the children, and parents often complained that their authority was undermined by the other parent.

While further research is necessary to determine how these patterns of co-parenting affect children's adjustment to divorce, there appears to be good cause to consider co-parenting dynamics in the construction of custody and living arrangements. Consequently, one of the challenges involved in the design of successful custody and visitation arrangements is the identification of couples at risk for problematic co-parenting relationships.

### **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

The purpose of this dissertation research was to identify potential relationship risk factors by exploring the links between individual personality development and the quality of the co-parenting relationship. The level of individual personality development was conceptualized as an independent variable that could be used to predict dependent variables related to the quality of the co-parenting relationship. The central hypothesis of the study was that couples with higher combined ratings for psychological maturity would be more successful in constructing cooperative co-parenting relationships than those with lower combined levels.

This hypothesis was based on a thesis advanced by Johnston and Campbell (1988) to illuminate the individual psychological factors involved in the prolonged, intractable custody disputes which they labeled "impasses of divorce." They proposed that individuals with fragile self-identities who were deeply wounded by the painful experiences associated with divorce often saw "winning" a custody dispute as a way of restoring damaged self-esteem. (This powerful dynamic has been noted by researchers from a range of theoretical perspectives.)

Two points should be made about the theoretical basis for the research described in this paper. First, whereas Johnston and Campbell (1988) had restricted their theorizing to particularly high conflict divorces, for the dissertation research it was assumed that the connection between the strength of the self-identity and behavior in the co-parenting relationship extended throughout the range of divorce outcomes (i.e., whether or not there was a divorce impasse). Second, Johnston and Campbell's measure of personality development--the strength of the self identity--was considered to have considerable overlap with other theoretical conceptualizations of psychological

maturity. (The importance of psychological maturity in guiding behavior has been stressed by virtually all contemporary psychological theories.) Therefore, while one particular clinical theory (psychoanalytic object relations) was used to design an empirical measure of psychological maturity for this dissertation, the substitution of other measures based on alternate theories would be expected to produce similar results.

## **METHOD**

Ratings of the psychological maturity of each parent in 30 couples were compared to the levels of conflict and cooperative communication reported by mothers in the following year. The personality ratings were based on interviews with each parent that explored the history of their terminated relationship, while the levels of conflict and communication were based on self-report forms filled out by mothers one year after those interviews (mother's forms were used because many fathers did not participate in the follow-up procedures).

The data used in this study had been previously collected by the "Infancy Project," a longitudinal study of the custody and visitation arrangements of divorced and separated parents of very young children, funded by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Department of Health and Human Services. The Infancy Project assessed parent and child adjustment in various visitation arrangements at baseline and at one year follow-up, using semi-structured interviews, self-report methods, and videotaped observations of each parent-child dyad in structured situations.

### **Subjects**

The Infancy Project recruited separated parents of very young children in the Bay Area through advertisements, referrals from legal and mental health professionals, or direct contact of potential subjects identified from Family Court Services' records. Each parent was paid \$75 for his or her participation. Children of participating families were 12-18 months old at the time of first contact, were their parents' first child together, and had at least one visit with the father per month (but did not spend more than 50% of their time in his care). In addition to the target sample of separated

families ( $n = 108$ ), comparison groups of single-mother families ( $n = 39$ ) and two-parent families ( $n = 55$ ) also participated in the Infancy Project study.

The dissertation research was based on data gathered from 30 couples in the target sample. These 60 parents were economically and ethnically diverse. Nearly a quarter of the parents reported annual incomes of less than \$10,000, and another 35 percent were in the \$10,000 to \$25,000 range. Among racial identifications, Caucasians (57%) and African-Americans (22%) were the most widely represented.

## Measures

**Marriage and Divorce Interview.** Since divorced and separated parents of very young children had not been studied previously as a group, the Infancy Project included open-ended exploratory methods in their data collection. Among these methods was the Marriage and Divorce Interview, a semi-structured audiotaped interview which asked participating fathers and mothers (interviewed separately in their homes at the time of the baseline contact) to describe their experiences of the relationship--especially the courtship, the decision to have a baby, and the end of the relationship. In the present study, transcripts of the Marriage and Divorce Interviews were used to assess each parent's individual level of psychological maturity.

**Measuring the independent variable.** The author designed a scale, the "Relationship History Scale" (RHS), to analyze the 20-30 page transcripts of the Marriage and Divorce Interviews in order to provide an estimate of each parent's psychological maturity. This scale includes a set of guidelines for rating a subject's discourse in terms of its quality (*how* his or her experiences were described) and content (*what* was described).

The Relationship History Scale is based on psychoanalytic object relations theory, which considers the ways that subjective experiences in relationships influence the development of the personality. A basic tenet of object relations theory is that the progressively elaborated mental representations of interpersonal experiences create relatively enduring structures which guide thought and action in the interpersonal world. In other words, starting in infancy, humans generalize from their subjective experience of interactions with others, in the process creating a mental architecture

which includes perceptual biases, scripts for behavior in relationships, longings, and expectations, all of which play a large part in determining the content and quality of future interactions.

Assessment of derivatives of these mental structures can provide an estimate of the maturity of an individual's personality. At the most basic level, such assessment most often focuses on two related capacities: the capacity to vary one's point of view, and the capacity to regulate and ultimately integrate the positive and negative feelings which arise in relationships. Each of these capacities is thought to have a normal developmental course which can be used as a yardstick against which to measure an individual's maturity. Thus, if all goes well in development, the breadth of one's point of view gradually expands, with the rigid egocentricity characteristic of young children being replaced by an increasingly flexible understanding of complexity and ambiguity. Similarly (again, under favorable developmental circumstances), over time the polarized ("all good" and "all bad") picture of the world favored by young children gives way to a more complex ambivalent view which integrates positive and negative reactions.

The Relationship History Scale was designed to quantify variations in development in these two capacities. In the dissertation study trained raters used the RHS to determine an individual level of "object relations" (psychological development) for each parent. Since the couple was the unit of analysis for predicting the quality of the co-parenting relationship, the individual ratings of each set of parents were combined to produce a couple score considered to be the independent variable, which was hypothesized to help determine the quality of the co-parenting relationship.

**Measuring the dependent variables.** The principal dependent variables in the dissertation study concerned the quality of the co-parenting relationship in the year following the baseline contact. Three variables were used to assess the relationship: the level of paternal involvement in decisions regarding the child, the level of verbal and physical aggression attributed to those fathers who continued to be involved in co-parenting (since fathers who disengaged from co-parenting might express less aggression due to their diminished contact), and the level of divorce-related litigation. In addition, a fourth variable--whether or not the decision to have a child was mutually planned--was also predicted to be related to a couple's combined RHS ratings.

**Table 1****Hypotheses and measures for the dependent variables.**

Hypothesis	Measure
(1) There would be a positive relationship between a couple's combined levels of object relations and the post-separation level of paternal involvement in decisions regarding the child.	Ahrons Communication Form (Follow-up)
(2) In families where the father was actively involved in co-parenting, there would be a negative correlation between the combined levels of object relations of the two parents and the level of verbal and physical aggression attributed to the father by the mother.	Conflict Tactics Scale (Follow-up)
(3) There would be a negative correlation between the combined levels of object relations of the two parents and the amount of divorce-related litigation reported.	Personal Data Sheet (Follow-up)
(4) Parents at higher combined levels of object relations would be more likely than parents at lower levels to report that the decision to have a baby was planned mutually.	Marriage and Divorce Interview (Baseline)

Table 1, above, presents the predicted relationships between the dependent and independent variables, and the measures used for each dependent variable.

All of the outcome data were derived from self-report forms completed at the follow-up contact, which was scheduled one year after the Marriage and Divorce Interview was conducted. Because 12 of the original 30 fathers were not available to complete follow-up procedures, the assessment of the levels of conflict and communication in the co-parenting relationship was based solely on mothers' reports.

## RESULTS

### Reliability

Each Marriage and Divorce Interview was rated independently by two raters randomly assigned from a pool of four raters who were blind to the hypotheses of this study. The interview of each parent in a given partnership was rated separately; that is, if the mother's interview was rated by raters *A* and *B*, then the father's interview was rated by raters *C* and *D*. If the two raters' scores deviated by more than one scale point, then a consensus rating was determined by conference. Reliability was computed using an intra-class correlation based on a one factor random effect analysis of variance model (ANOVA). The reliability index for the 120 ratings generated by the four raters in this study was .60. Further examination of the ratings revealed that the rater with the least clinical experience required more conferences than the other raters. Consequently, a second ANOVA was computed excluding those subjects rated by this rater, yielding a reliability index of .82.

### Communication

Reports from the mothers in this sample indicated that most couples maintained limited communication about their young child after the separation. Less than half of the couples had regular discussions about such topics as long-range and day-to-day decisions regarding the child, positive and negative behaviors of the child, problems in the co-parenting relationship, etc. Nearly one-third of the couples in the sample could be described as having a disengaged pattern of communication, in which there were rarely or never *any* discussions about the child.

It was hypothesized that a couple's combined RHS level would predict the amount of co-parental communication reported by the mother at the follow-up. The correlation between these two variables was .45 ( $p < .02$ ), indicating that the RHS ratings did indeed account for approximately 20 percent of the variance in the level of communication.

## Verbal aggression and violence

At the time of the one year follow-up, most mothers reported that one or both partners had been verbally aggressive toward the other in the previous year, and several reported the presence of physical aggression as well. More than half of the mothers reported that their former partners *frequently* resorted to such verbally aggressive behaviors as insulting, swearing, sulking, stomping out of the room, saying something to spite the former partner, threatening to hurt the former partner, or physically attacking a nearby object. Furthermore, in more than one-third of all couples the mother reported that the father had crossed the line between verbal and physical aggression on at least one occasion in the previous year.

It was hypothesized that in those families where the father was actively engaged in co-parenting, there would be a negative correlation between a couple's combined levels of object relations and the level of aggression attributed to the father by the mother at the follow-up. For the 19 couples who did not exhibit a disengaged pattern of communication, the correlation between the RHS total and the father's verbal aggression percentile was  $-.48$  ( $p < .05$ ), and the correlation between RHS total and father's physical aggression percentile was  $-.46$  ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, variations in the RHS levels of the parents accounted for approximately 20 percent of the variation in reported levels of verbal and physical aggression.

## Postseparation litigation

At the time of the follow-up contact, each parent completed a questionnaire which included the question, "Have there been any legal actions in the divorce process in the last year, such as modifications of custody, interlocutory motions, and orders of the courts?" In 4 of the 17 cases where responses from both parents were available, the two parents gave conflicting answers to the question. For the purposes of hypothesis testing these 4 couples were scored as having had some litigation in the previous year, based on the reasoning that a court proceeding would more likely be forgotten than fabricated. However, this high proportion of disagreement, affecting nearly one-quarter of the couples for whom information was available, casts serious doubt on the reliability of the measure of the dependent variable.

It was hypothesized that parents at higher combined levels of object relations would have been involved in less divorce related litigation in the previous year than parents at lower levels. However, since the correlation between couples' RHS totals and the dichotomous dependent variable (some litigation or none) was not statistically significant ( $r = -.21$ ), this hypothesis was not supported by the data.

### **Decision to have a baby**

On the Marriage and Divorce Interview, each parent was asked the question "Was there a moment when you decided to conceive this baby?" When both parents' responses to this question were compared, in only five of the thirty couples was there clear agreement that the decision to conceive was planned mutually. It was hypothesized that parents at higher combined levels of object relations would be more likely to report that the decision to have a baby was planned mutually than parents at lower levels. However, when couples' RHS totals were compared with the dichotomous dependent variable (planned or not), this hypothesis was not supported ( $r = .01$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

This study of the relationships of 30 couples explored the link between individual mental functioning and patterns of behavior in post-separation relationships. Aspects of the individual psychological maturity of each parent were assessed through analysis of semi-structured interviews recounting the history of the terminated relationship. These baseline personality ratings (in the form of a combined score for each couple) were compared with levels of communication and conflict reported for the co-parenting relationship one year later. As predicted, the combined personality ratings for both parents were found to be related both to levels of communication and to levels of conflict reported later in the co-parenting relationship.

Since the levels of communication and conflict have been shown to be useful in defining patterns of co-parenting, the present findings have several potential practical applications. In the first place, assessment of the personality variables examined in the present study could be included in custody evaluations to help match living

arrangements with probable parenting styles. For example, joint custody arrangements, which require a high level of cooperative communication between parents, would not be the best choice for parents who are at risk of forming disengaged or highly conflicted co-parenting relationships.

In addition, consideration of the specific factors that were assessed by the Relationship History Scale may offer further guidance for those involved in the design of custody and visitation arrangements. While the design of the RHS was inspired by clinical theory involving hypothesized mental structures, on an operational level it focused on variations in the capacity to process the complexities of the external interpersonal world. Thus, individuals at the lower end of the spectrum have difficulty appreciating points of view other than their own, and tend to avoid complexity and ambiguity by polarizing the world into "all good" or "all bad" experiences. If such individuals have difficulty managing the complexity and ambiguity which is a part of everyday human relations, imagine the challenge they face in the aftermath of divorce, when shifting roles and emotional extremes call for flexibility and resilience.

On the other hand, individuals at the other end of the spectrum--those more comfortable with complexity and ambiguity--have the ability to take multiple points of view into account (e.g., their own, the partner's, and the child's) and are better able to maintain ambivalent attitudes about themselves and their partner. As a result, they have considerably more perspective and flexibility in negotiating the process of family reconfiguration. In addition, they are better able to accept the painful feelings that accompany divorce, thereby allowing mourning and other healing processes to proceed.

Use of the Relationship History Scale or other methods to bring these specific personality features to light could help inform the construction of successful custody and visitation arrangements. For example, couples in which one or both partners have difficulty managing complexity and ambiguity would seem to do better with plans that have an unambiguous and relatively inflexible structure, including clearly articulated steps of implementation with specific timelines. In addition, the identification of vulnerable individuals would help professionals tailor their interventions to fit specific cases. For example, Johnston and Campbell (1988) suggest some strategies designed

to restore the damaged and diminished sense of self of parents who might otherwise turn to litigation to bolster their self-esteem.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE DISSERTATION STUDY**

The dissertation described in this paper, in concentrating on the relationship between the parents, presented only one piece of a complex system. While this restriction was certainly appropriate for a small-scale exploratory study, it did diminish the cogency of the findings. In particular, the absence of information regarding the child, especially in terms of his or her adjustment to the parental separation, was a serious limitation. As a result, this study offers little direct assistance to those involved in the important practical work of designing custody and visitation arrangements for very young children. However, the empirically demonstrated association between manifestations of specific individual personality factors detectable around the time of the break-up and the subsequent quality of the co-parenting relationship has important practical implications which merit further exploration.

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## APPENDIX: CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

These specific case illustrations are provided to help illustrate how individual differences in management of complexity and ambiguity can affect a relationship.

### **Case # 1. Difficulties accepting individuality**

One of the simplest strategies for managing complexity in the interpersonal world is to try to ignore it. For example, for one couple in this sample the minimization of differences appeared to play a crucial role in their early days together. In fact, both partners described their experiences together in similar terms. This is how the husband described the relationship: "We just had a giddy, happy, crazy, self-contained little universe that was just as good as anything I've ever experienced." And, "I mean, this was a woman who was very much wrapped up in me as I was with her. We were just, you know, like laminated to each other." In a separate interview, his wife echoed his words: "It was that feeling of having our own little world within this world." And, "I was glued to him--there was not a difference between who I saw myself and who he is."

However, this "self-contained universe" required continuing psychological contortions to maintain the illusion that there were no differences between the two partners. As the wife put it, "To me, it almost felt like being caught in a whirling cyclone of no reality. I mean it was just like this thing that kept getting bigger and bigger. It felt really wonderful, but it wasn't very real."

In this case, the wife came to find this arrangement oppressive (she may have outgrown it, as she was significantly younger than the husband). In her words:

In the relationship there were a lot of issues of me feeling like I couldn't be myself. It's hard to put it in a nutshell, but the dynamics of our relationship kept me from just expressing all my needs and wants.... He's very particular, meticulous ... and I just fell into his way of being, and kind of redid myself into what he wanted me to be, and then I

realized I'm not that person. I don't need to have everything so structured in my life. I feel like I'm rebelling now.

The husband, on the other hand, resisted change. One example from his interview:

We hadn't been in this house six months. And it was an absolutely gorgeous house... And I would get out [on the deck] on a Sunday after finally putting the baby down, ready to read the paper and have a cup of coffee, and she'd be talking about, I don't know, some fantasy trip of selling the house and moving to a rural area....And I'd say "I don't want to talk about this." And she'd say, "Can't we even joke about it or dream about it?" And I said, "No. I'm very happy where we are here. And I don't even want you thinking those kind of thoughts."

This statement by the husband is a stark example of the lack of flexibility that can characterize the thinking of someone who is intolerant of difference. Needless to say, this inflexibility can be particularly problematic in the aftermath of a breakup, when relations are so fluid and ambiguous. But at such times the status of the self-identity may be even more problematic. The insistence that the other be a reflection of the self suggests that, to begin with, something essential for self-sufficiency is profoundly lacking. Imagine the assault to such a fragile self-identity when the partner reneges on the tacit agreement to be part of the self (and thereby provide what is missing), thus adding betrayal to the experience of rejection. In such circumstances, according to the thesis advanced by Johnston and Campbell (1988), a custody battle may offer both a diversion and an opportunity to restore a lost sense of power.

## **Case # 2. Difficulties tolerating ambivalence**

Similarly, difficulties integrating complexity and ambiguity in the realm of affect can play a critical role in the history of relationships, affecting the courses both of their construction and of their destruction. For example, in the initial stages of a relationship, when the personality of the potential partner is known only on the surface, it is inevitable that the imagination fills in the gaps, and only natural that the resulting image includes projected wishes and fantasies. The danger lies not in creating an idealized image of the other, but in being unable to recognize that this is just a first

impression, or unable to accommodate aspects of the partner which don't match this image. Individuals who cannot tolerate affective complexity, for whom everything is black or white with no shades of gray, are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to the work of maintaining a relationship which includes negative experiences of the partner. One mother provided a down-to-earth summation of the challenges new couples face in this regard: "At first it was so new and so magical, it was overwhelming. It overwhelmed all the negative stuff. After awhile it becomes a little more commonplace and then it takes a little more work and if you're not aware of that then it tends to develop stresses."

One option available for individuals who can't handle affective complexity is to let the wave of positive feelings propel them forward, to race ahead with the relationship without taking time to stop and consider. For example, several couples in this study moved in together within days or weeks of meeting, and got married soon thereafter. This is how one of these couples described their courtship, beginning with several examples from the husband's account:

We met, had a couple of drinks, talked for a couple of hours one night and she invited me over to her house the following day. We slept together that night. And for about the next two to three months, had a very, very active, very torrid love affair...

We didn't do anything half-hearted. You know, when we went out to dinner, we went out to dinner. When we went out and danced, we closed the club. And not to go into too much on this level, but when we made love, we made love! I mean, it was really intense. I think that's part of the reason when it stopped, I felt such a letdown and disappointment, because it was up here, you know...

We were engaged three months after we met. And it was just a, it was a whirlwind: bing, bang, boom.

The wife was equally intoxicated in the beginning:

He felt like the most wonderful guy in the world. He paid attention to me, he did me well, he was concerned for me at all times.... All my friends, when I would tell them about him, would say, "God, you met the perfect guy! How did you get so lucky? He's tall, he's good-looking, he treats you like you're a princess; he's always thinking about you, bringing you little gifts, sending cards and flowers." He was just really lavishing me with attention at all times!

What appears to have been missing in this relationship was the ability to delay action and prolong uncertainty long enough to allow second thoughts to balance first impressions. While impetuous cohabitation, marriage, and conception of a child might each in turn serve to prolong an idealized positive experience of the relationship, sooner or later the inevitable shortcomings of the partner must be dealt with. If this is not possible, the inability to tolerate ambivalence is likely to cause the balance to shift to the other end of the spectrum, where the partner must be denigrated. He or she becomes the container of all that is wrong in the relationship, leaving the self the blameless victim. This seems to have been the case for this couple. Here are some examples of how the husband described later stages of the relationship:

The unique, one of the unique things about M and my relationship was that it was a relationship of extremes. We were either happy or we were miserable. When we were happy, we were happy. When we were miserable, it was unbearable....

B's birth was both the crowning glory in my life and the worst moment I ever had....

I still love [her] and I don't bear her any malice or anything else like that, but I think now that [she] knew exactly what she was doing from the day that she and I met. I'm not saying that this was anything on her part that was conscious subversion or anything else, but I think [she] knew damn well what she was doing, that, how do I say this? Our

marriage was planned but our divorce was also planned. And I don't think now that there's anything that I could have done, looking back in retrospect that would have changed that. Anything.

The intensity of the wife's negative feelings for her former husband was obvious in her interview. Here are several examples:

He's working on intimidation which was basically the whole basis of our marriage, once we were married....

[He's] a very controlling person. And everything has to be done his way....

He's a person who's consumed by rage, and he keeps it barely under the surface, and lately it's gotten even more out of control....

I just want him out of my life. I realize he can't be fully out of my life because of [their child], but I don't want any contact with him at all. I've said to him straight out, "I don't want to talk to you at all. I don't want to see you at all unless it concerns [the child]." I just want him to go and get on with his life. I hate to wish him on some other woman, but as soon as he gets a girlfriend, he's going to leave me alone .... He's never going to be totally stable, and I hate to say it, but he comes from a really twisted family with really twisted values, and I hope he can find somebody who doesn't have any kids, and just settle down.

In these descriptions of the formerly beloved partner, both parents sound a note of betrayal, as if convinced that if the self was deceived, than it must have been done by the partner. It appears that these individuals cannot bear the disappointment which would result if their expectations were abandoned, or even modified. Therefore the partner must be denigrated, for the alternative--to admit to self-deception--opens the door to the unacceptable possibility that the longed-for ideal is unobtainable. As long as they are unable to settle for anything less, these people are destined to the endless pursuit of unreachable dreams of love.

### Case # 3. Integration of complexity and ambiguity

The two couples just described have been presented as examples of relationships that were marked by a rigid avoidance of complexity and ambiguity. It was argued that in the first case, avoidance of complexity and ambiguity were manifested as an intolerance of differences, while in the second case it took the form of polarization of affective representations of the partner and the relationship.

The form taken by such strategies might be seen more clearly when contrasted with excerpts from an interview with a mother who was better able to tolerate and integrate complexity and ambiguity. It should be stressed that differences between these subjects are matters of degree, and that this mother shared some of the personality patterns described in the first two cases. For example, like the wife presented in Case # 1, she seemed to lose her own individuality in the relationship:

[Husband] and I had different interests, but because all I wanted was to be with him and I was completely happy doing whatever he was doing, I completely dropped all of my interests and started to pursue his with him, because that seemed to be what made him happy.

Likewise, she presented some aspects of the relationship in idealized terms: "He was my best friend from the very start; I trusted him and there was nothing I couldn't tell him. Almost nothing. I'd say 99.9 percent of my life I could discuss with him."

However, to a greater extent than many other parents in this sample, this woman was able to hold a complex view of herself, her former husband, and their relationship. As a result, she had more perspective when encountering the painful experiences which accompany divorce. For example, the following passage shows how her reaction to experiences of betrayal was tempered through integration with a sustaining positive self-identity:

I have really high expectations of myself, as a friend and a person. I have certain values, and I have certain ways that I feel about myself, and

sometimes its a real effort to keep those up. That's not [always] the way I feel. Sometimes I'd like to slash somebody's tires or run over someone in a truck or say nasty hostile things or make obscene phone calls, but I have not done any of those things.... And that's what I'm working on right now. And provided I can work though all that, I can continue to be the person that I've been for the last year and a half. And [husband's] been really really lucky that I've been that way and made it really easy on him.

Similarly, this mother's comfort with complexity allowed her to differentiate between her experience and her husband's, and thus take his point of view into account. Consider her explanation for his decision to have an affair: "Looking back in retrospect its a lot easier to see, he was trying to get out of a relationship that he perceived as failing."

This willingness to understand her partner's point of view is not without its dangers (after all, this is a woman who was willing to give up all of her own interests in favor of her husband's), and it may well be that this mother pays a high price for her flexibility. However, this same flexibility appears to serve her young child's needs well. Compare this mother's reaction to one of her son's moments of mastery, with the corresponding reaction of a different parent, a father who was locked in a seemingly interminable struggle for control with his former wife. First the mother's reaction to her baby's accomplishment:

Within the last week, I handed him a fork, and he stabbed something on his highchair and kinda stuck it in his mouth. I didn't even realize he could do that yet. I just handed it to him, and he did it. He had been watching what I was doing. I don't know at what age they're supposed to accomplish that, but, it was an achievement....It felt wonderful! I dialed the phone, I called his dad, and said, 'Guess what your son just did!'"

The gift this mother is giving her son in co-parenting him in the fullest sense of the word can be better appreciated when her response is contrasted with the other father's reaction to what he thinks is his daughter's first word:

She pointed at the cat and I said "It's a cat!" and she said "Caaat." That's the first time that she had said anything. And I wrote it down in my journal. And then next week [her mother] made it a point to show that she could say something. "Hi!" She could say that. As if it had been her first word. I still haven't told [her mother] that I may have beaten her by a week.